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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT TOPI IN GREECE: ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

¶1. (SBU) Athens welcomed President Bamir Topi for his first state visit to Greece November 25 - 27. Accompanied by a delegation of government officials and Albanian businessmen, the visit's positive images and controlled public relations message overshadowed enduring tensions on many of the political issues that hang between the two countries. Topi and his diplomatic adviser were thrilled by the reception the President received from his Greek hosts.

¶2. (U) Significant pomp accompanied the visit, beginning with a jet-fighter escort through Greek airspace and streets lined with Albania's double-headed eagle flag. The delegation included Foreign Minister Basha, Interior Minister Nishani, Health Minister Ndoka, Members of Parliament, local mayors and businessmen.

¶3. (SBU) Official meetings with Greek President Karolos Papoulias and Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis focused on bilateral and regional issues, widely covered in the local media, including increased cooperation on economic, security, customs, and education issues. Little was said publicly on the more sensitive topics of Kosovo status, NATO accession and reciprocal minority populations. President Papoulias endorsed Albania's path to NATO accession, saying that "Greece steadily supports Albania's European and Euro-Atlantic course to further strengthen stability in the region and beyond." He accepted an invitation from Topi to visit Albania. Prime Minister Karamanlis pledged Greece's ratification of Albania's Stabilization and Association Agreement, already approved by 14 EU countries.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: Topi's trip is another example of Albania's broad international lobbying effort in the months leading up to next spring's NATO Summit in Bucharest. Tension between Greece and Albania waxes and wanes, particularly on key issues such as minority rights and regional relations. Nonetheless, Topi and his delegation reported a warm welcome and claimed success in forging deeper ties with a NATO ally whose support is key in the region.

WITHERS